

CHAPTER 25

ON TO SIO

ON 5th December Lieut-Colonel Cusworth's 29th/46th Battalion, supported by a troop of tanks, two platoons of machine-gunners from the 2/2nd Machine Gun Battalion, the 56th Battery, and engineers from the 2/7th Field Company led the advance on the first stage along the coast from Gusika. For flank protection a company from the 37th/52nd Battalion assisted by a platoon of the ubiquitous Papuans moved along the foothills parallel with the main advance. The brigade's intention was to "clear coast to high ground area Fortification Point".

Before dawn on the 5th the 29th/46th moved to its assembly area near Gusika. The start-line was 300 yards north of the Kalueng River. Captain Eames' company was to advance from it along the coastal track, and Captain Fletcher's¹ to move parallel with Eames' round the western edge of the timber and take over from the 22nd Battalion on that flank. In the western foothills "Macforce", comprising Major Macfarlane's² company of the 37th/52nd Battalion and the Papuans prepared to advance level with the 29th/46th.

Just before reaching the start-line Eames' company was fired on. One minute later the supporting artillery began to fire. At ten-minute intervals the barrage lifted in bounds of 100 yards. Against sporadic Japanese fire the infantry, with three tanks, steadily advanced. By 8.45 a.m. they left the kunai for the jungle and reached the first creek. At 10 a.m. the leading tank ran over a land mine south of the creek and its tracks were blown off. This was a severe set-back, but worse was to come when the other two tanks were unable to cross the creek without the engineers' help, and the leading company had to advance alone. Several abandoned positions were passed before the company was held up by enemy fire and two men were wounded—the battalion's first casualties.

While Eames was advancing along the coastal track Fletcher's company was trying to keep parallel along the timber-edge to the west of the track. Its left platoon soon met opposition from well-concealed positions on the far side of the creek. To prevent any flanking move from this creek towards the battalion's main advance the platoon remained in this position until the early afternoon, and the other two moved to the right. Lieutenant Home³ led a patrol up the north bank of the creek but was soon forced to return because of strong opposition. He was describing events to his company commander when he (Home) was killed by a sniper's bullet.

Both companies were thus held up by an enemy who was obviously trying to hold the line of the first creek where kunai merged into jungle.

¹ Maj S. Fletcher, VX4050. 2/7 and 29/46 Bns. Regular soldier; of Leongatha, Vic; b. Geraldton, WA, 10 Feb 1900.

² Maj C. W. Macfarlane, MC, VX5545. 2/7 and 37/52 Bns, 4 NG Inf Bn. Commercial traveller; of Glen Iris, Vic; b. Gardiner, Vic, 13 Jul 1914.

³ Lt S. E. Home, QX45103; 29/46 Bn. Grocer; of Brisbane; b. Brisbane, 24 Jul 1915. Killed in action 5 Dec 1943.

The opposition confronting the right company, however, was brushed aside without the support of the tanks and by 1.30 the company was half way between the first creek and the Lagoon. The artillery could give little support to this advance because the observer could only guess at the whereabouts of the Australian spearhead in the dense scrub. Snipers' bullets were whistling among the men advancing in extended line. The opposition was too heavy and the leading platoon withdrew 100 yards and dug in with company headquarters.

By 2 p.m. Eames' company reached the northern edge of a neglected native garden among dense jungle south of the Lagoon. At the same time they heard firing from their south-west, where the two platoons of the flanking company, under Lieutenant Routley,⁴ were attacking the Japanese position north of the creek. In the first burst of enemy firing Routley was wounded; Sergeant Herring⁵ then took charge of the two platoons and led his troops towards the first enemy position which he rushed and wiped out with grenades. Under heavy fire the platoons continued up the terraces and drove the enemy from his forward positions, but found the fire too strong and withdrew 60 yards to a favourable position near the creek. Cusworth now ordered Eames to dig in for the night and the rest of the battalion to block up behind the forward company.

At first light on the 6th Captain Petersen's⁶ company advanced along a track to the west of the main track; Eames moved parallel along the coastal track, and Major Tilley's company went to attack the enemy positions holding up the flanking company (now commanded by Captain Wilson⁷ in place of Fletcher, who was ill), but found that the Japanese had left during the night. By 8.45 a.m. Eames was fired on from between the two tracks leading away to the north on the inland side of the Lagoon. The 29th/46th Battalion was now learning how frustrating it could be to be fired on by a hidden enemy in dense jungle. At 9.20, when Eames began an encircling movement round the general area where he thought the enemy were, bullets from a Woodpecker and light machine-guns caused casualties among the Australians. A section led by Corporal Deslandes⁸ was cut off a few yards from an enemy gun. Although wounded, Deslandes bravely went forward to attack the gun; he was killed as he was pulling the pin from a grenade and all members of the section were either killed or wounded. Eames now sent two of his platoons into the attack, but found the enemy had hastily departed leaving six dead.

Along the axis of the left track Petersen's company in the thick jungle found progress slow and tiring, but drove out an enemy group that opposed

⁴ Maj W. V. Routley, MBE, VX26713. 29/46 Bn, and training appointments. Transport driver; of Launceston, Tas; b. Launceston, 13 Mar 1914.

⁵ WO2 H. H. Herring, MM, VX108987; 29/46 Bn. Farmer; of Korumburra South, Vic; b. Drouin, Vic, 23 Feb 1920.

⁶ Capt N. H. G. Petersen, VX117182; 29/46 Bn. Salesman; of Korumburra, Vic; b. Korumburra, 21 Aug 1912. Killed in action 8 Dec 1943.

⁷ Capt H. Wilson, VX104176; 29/46 Bn. Grocer; of Korumburra, Vic; b. Korumburra, 23 Dec 1913. Died 10 Aug 1957.

⁸ Cpl R. C. A. Deslandes, VX105949; 29/46 Bn. Paint machinist; of Fitzroy, Vic; b. Fitzroy, 9 Dec 1920. Killed in action 6 Dec 1943.

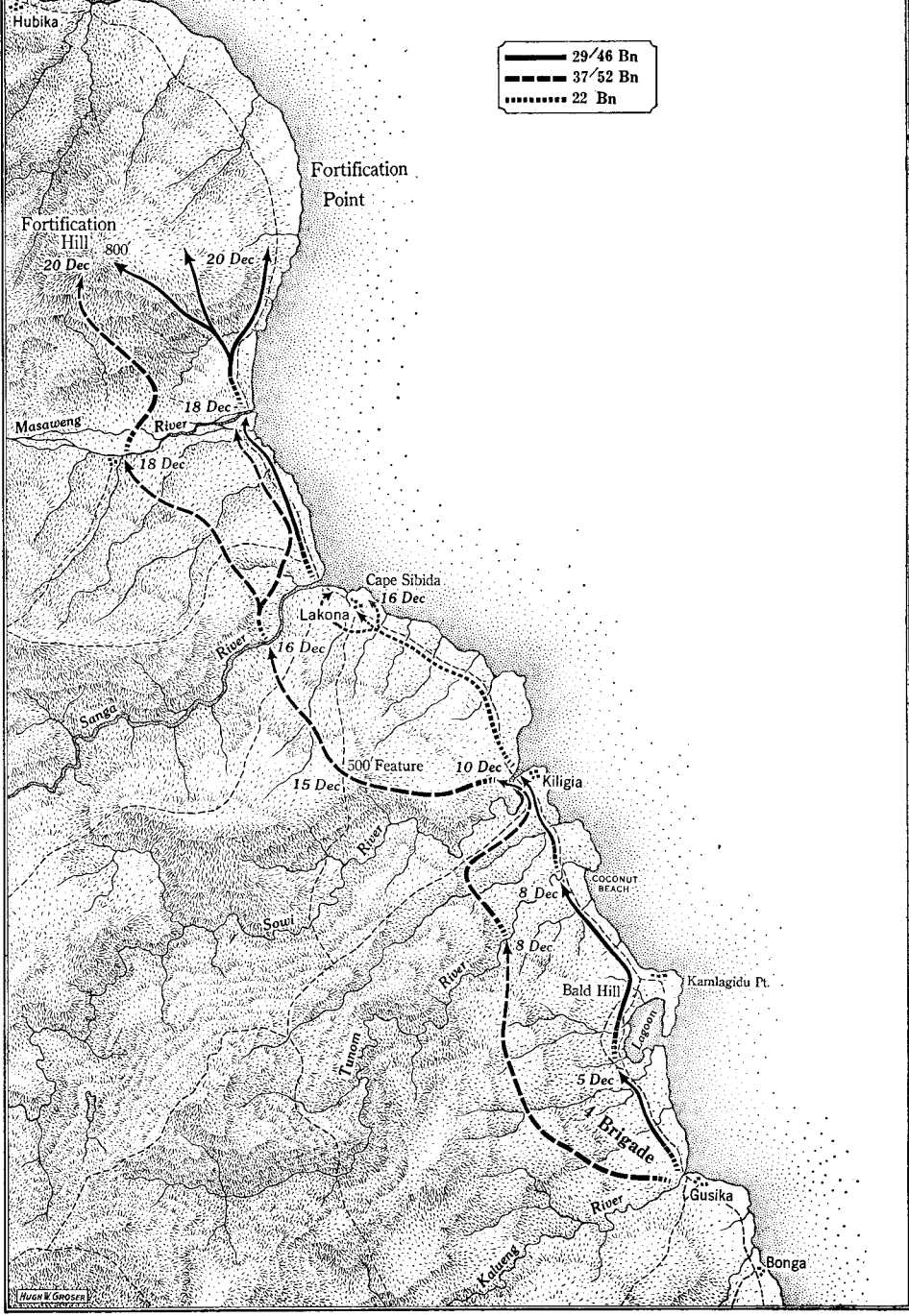
them. Then Cusworth sent this company into the lead along the coastal track, and Tilley's company to clear the creek area on the west of the advance. For the next two hours the battalion steadily but slowly advanced against weakening opposition. At 2.40 p.m. Petersen was on Bald Hill level with the northern end of the Lagoon. On the flank Tilley reached the garden area west of the Lagoon early in the afternoon. Patrols then moved into the steep rugged country to the west of the garden and searched for Japanese in the many gullies. The leading platoon encountered a machine-gun post, but after ten minutes of artillery bombardment these Japanese hastily withdrew. As mentioned, the orders of the Japanese rearguard were "while avoiding any decisive engagement" to "carry out successive resistance to try to delay enemy advance".

During this two-day advance of the 29th/46th, "Macforce" of the 37th/52nd had been moving parallel along the foothills. On the 6th Papuan scouts saw an enemy patrol moving along a spur. Quickly setting an ambush Macfarlane's men killed eight Japanese including two officers, all from the *20th Engineer Regiment* of the *20th Division*.

On 7th December Wilson's company of the 29th/46th, leading the advance along the coastal track, was held up by heavy fire from an enemy position about half way between the Lagoon and the Tunom River. Unfortunately the tanks were still not up with the advance. A section of the 2/7th Field Company was searching for mines ahead of the tanks, but detectors were not available and probing was uncertain and dangerous. Even so this section on the first day lifted 14 mines from the track. On the second day detectors were sent forward but they proved unserviceable. While snagging logs a tractor broke a track when it ran over a mine. Worse misfortune followed on the 7th when a second tank blew a track, the remaining five were temporarily bogged, and then a third tank was permanently put out of action by mines. Since the first day of the offensive enemy mines had disabled three tanks, one bulldozer and one tractor—a great success for the Japanese rearguard. The engineers now cut another track which they rapidly corduroyed and the tanks set out to reduce the two-day gap between them and the leading infantry. This was the situation when at 12.55 p.m. on the 7th Wilson's company was ordered forward again. Supported by heavy artillery fire the company advanced a short distance against fierce enemy resistance, but the volume of supporting fire from the artillery and the machine-guns turned the tide.

Tilley's company now advanced from its high flanking position but after some distance the leading section was grenaded from well-concealed positions on the steep sides of the creek it was following and some men were wounded. A frontal attack by the leading section led to more Australian casualties. With four killed and four wounded the platoon was cut off from its company; moving east it joined the leading platoon of Petersen's company, which had taken over the advance only to be held up by sniper fire; Eames' company, which was trying to reach the mouth of the Tunom was also held up by fire from snipers. For the night the battalion dug in south of the last creek before the Tunom.

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Advance to Fortification Point, 5th-20th December

After a quiet night the advance continued early on the 8th. Captain Petersen was killed while reconnoitring with a small patrol. Eames' company then took over the coastal thrust but both leading companies ran into stubborn opposition; it soon became apparent that the Japanese rear-guard was clinging to any natural obstacles while the main body of the *20th Division* hurried north and north-east from Wareo.

Tilley's company gained no ground on the 8th, but its fierce skirmishing helped to relieve enemy pressure on the company on the coastal track. By 10 a.m. Eames was slowly advancing; fire from snipers across a chasm and from a well-concealed Woodpecker caused casualties and slowed progress in the dense jungle. At midday, however, Corporal McNee⁹ charged forward, wiped out the gun crew with grenades and captured the gun. The company now pushed cautiously towards the creek where they encountered a chasm 30 feet deep and 20 feet wide at the bottom, almost bare and steeply walled. On the opposite side enemy positions could be seen. Sergeant Cole¹ placed one of his Bren teams on a small rise whence they could rake the opposite bank. At 1.50 p.m. the men were suddenly shelled at 75 yards' range by a 75-mm gun across the chasm, and three were killed. During the shelling Lance-Corporal Hamilton,² a Bren gunner from the right-hand platoon, noticed an enemy observation post apparently in the act of directing the gun's fire. Standing up to get a better shot he destroyed it and then switched his attack to spray the probable gun site. The Japanese gunfire ceased abruptly.

Aided by heavy artillery fire Eames advanced a short distance. North of the creek there was much enemy movement through a small coconut plantation, but whether withdrawal or reinforcement it was difficult to say. As all companies dug in for the night the tanks finally moved up. A patrol reconnoitring the probable line of advance for the next day crossed the chasm, and found the 75-mm gun spiked and beside it two dead Japanese and six fresh graves. Little progress had been made on this day. If the Japanese ran true to form, however, they would probably withdraw during the night rather than suffer such heavy casualties in men and equipment as they had on the 8th.

Meanwhile, on the left flank, Colonel Rowan moved his whole battalion up to join Macforce and by the morning of the 8th Captain Clapperton's³ company of the 37th/52nd was in the lead over the rugged terraces. As it approached the Tunom River the going became very difficult; often the men had to crawl up on hands and knees; but about 5.30 p.m. they crossed the Tunom. Clapperton was now confronted by a single razor-back spur over which lay the sole route forward. It was only possible to climb up on a one platoon front.

⁹ Cpl L. J. McNee, MM, VX108999; 29/46 Bn. Packer; of Fitzroy, Vic; b. Fitzroy, 31 Aug 1920.

¹ Sgt F. O. Cole, VX105941; 29/46 Bn. Postman; of North Fitzroy, Vic; b. Fryerstown, Vic, 22 May 1910.

² Cpl J. W. Hamilton, MM, VX144391; 29/46 Bn. Farmer; of Cudgewa, Vic; b. Corryong, Vic, 15 Jan 1923.

³ Capt G. T. Clapperton, VX108223; 37/52 Bn. Clerk; of Williamstown, Vic; b. Williamstown, 20 Jul 1918.

An hour after the crossing Lieutenant Innes⁴ platoon reached a false crest beyond which was a slight depression and from this the enemy opened fire. Caught on a narrow spur there was little the Australians could do as the sides were too steep to make encirclement feasible and any withdrawal could place the company in a hopeless position tactically if the Japanese counter-attacked. Innes tried an encircling movement round the left flank with one of his sections, but it withdrew after Innes and two of his men were killed.

The enemy immediately counter-attacked but once again the situation produced the man. Standing on the false crest Corporal Drew⁵ fired his Bren from the hip into the advancing Japanese. The Japanese wavered and then made off while Clapperton rapidly brought up the rest of his company into a small area of dead ground just below the crest. Australians and Japanese now clung to their positions within about 30 yards of one another and consequently within grenade-throwing range.

By dusk on 8th December therefore Brigadier Edgar had two battalions forward along the line of the Tunom. His third battalion—the 22nd—had moved up to the Lagoon area. Wareo having fallen on this day it was likely that the Japanese would leave stubborn rearguards along the tracks from the coast to those leading north and north-east from Wareo. If the retreating *20th Division* was to be salvaged to fight again the rearguards must delay the Australian coastal advance as long as possible. Thus the Japanese were fighting as fiercely for the line of the Tunom against the 4th Brigade as they were for the tracks leading north-east from Wareo against the 24th and 26th Brigades. Clapperton was in fact warned that he might soon cross one of the main Japanese escape routes.

As so often happened, the Japanese had had enough and withdrew from the line of the creek. While the companies of the 29th/46th on the left searched for the Japanese who had opposed the crossing at the chasm and farther up the creek, Sergeant Cole's platoon led the advance towards the mouth of the Tunom and by 11.45 a.m. had reached it. By 1 p.m. when Eames reported that the Tunom beach would be suitable for barges and dumps, two companies of the 22nd Battalion were moving up to clear the last enemy pocket south of the creek.

The enemy defence had thus cracked near the coast but farther up the Tunom they refused to budge. Here, at first light on the 9th, the enemy opened up on Clapperton's company with Woodpeckers firing on fixed lines along both sides of the spur the company held. Realising that his only hope was to send a force back down the spur, along the Tunom, and up another spur well to the left, Clapperton sent Lieutenant Withington's⁶ platoon to do this. At the same time Rowan sent Captain Kitney's⁷

⁴Lt R. W. Innes, WX3694. 2/16 and 37/52 Bns. Shop assistant; of Victoria Park, WA; b. Leederville, WA, 2 Jun 1915. Killed in action 8 Dec 1943.

⁵Cpl R. A. Drew, DCM, VX72101; 37/52 Bn. Labourer; of Glenhuntly, Vic; b. Maryborough, Vic, 20 Jun 1921.

⁶Capt E. A. Withington, VX101971; 37/52 Bn. Regular soldier; of Deepdene, Vic; b. Brunswick, Vic, 11 Sep 1916.

⁷Capt M. W. W. Kitney, VX108254; 37/52 Bn. Clerk; b. Kent, England, 7 Jan 1907.

company to capture a garden area closer on Clapperton's left flank and by 8.30 a.m. it had inflicted eight casualties on a Japanese force near the garden.

Meanwhile, Withington's platoon had reached the river where it saw 46 Japanese moving north-east along the south bank. As he had a task to do Withington pressed on ignoring these Japanese. By grasping vines and rocks the men climbed the left-hand spur and from the top opened up on the Japanese. The platoon was immediately fired on by other Japanese farther left, and withdrew. It seemed fairly obvious that the 37th/52nd Battalion was trying to intrude into an area which was vital to the Japanese escape plans.

Soon Kitney reported heavy opposition in precipitous country near the garden, and Rowan ordered Clapperton to withdraw. A skilful and hazardous withdrawal in the face of an aggressive enemy was successful mainly because of the determination of Corporal Lean's⁸ rearguard section which gave the rest of the company 20 minutes' start and then raced the Japanese to the crossing by a few minutes. Quickly setting up two Woodpeckers the Japanese aimed them at a kunai patch through which lay the withdrawal route; two men were killed and two wounded during the withdrawal.

After this setback, which cost the 37th/52nd 10 killed, the positions of the leading battalions were reversed; the 29th/46th was now north of the Tunom and the 37th/52nd south of it. Edgar decided to use his three battalions on the 10th: 29th/46th on the right, 22nd in the centre, and 37th/52nd on the left. Accompanied by tanks the 29th/46th had an unopposed advance and by 1.40 p.m. was on the Sowi. With heavy supporting fire the battalion advanced at 3 p.m. and found Kiligia recently abandoned. This was a propitious moment for the arrival in this forward area of Generals Berryman and Wooten. The other two battalions also had a quiet day. The 22nd Battalion found the Japanese still occupying the troublesome position at the creek junction but after a mortar bombardment the only Japanese still there were seven dead. Farther west the 37th/52nd found little opposition.

The Japanese did not contest the crossing of the Sowi—a shallow stream in a wide rocky bed—and by last light on the 11th a company of the 22nd, now in the lead, crossed the river and dug in for the night. Colonel O'Connor's orders were to capture the area from Lakona to the high ground to the west. On the 12th the 22nd Battalion, supported by the tanks and two platoons of machine-gunners had a successful day; the enemy rearguard fired on the approaching infantry but disappeared when the tanks arrived. In the afternoon, however, there was opposition at two points, and at each a platoon commander—first Lieutenant Burleigh,⁹ and then Lieutenant Grainger¹—was killed.

⁸ Cpl B. M. Lean, V41809; 37/52 Bn. French polisher; b. Auburn, Vic, 1 May 1917.

⁹ Lt A. W. Burleigh, VX108134; 22 Bn. Schoolteacher; of Essendon, Vic; b. Chewton, Vic, 10 Jun 1912. Killed in action 12 Dec 1943.

¹ Lt C. H. Grainger, VX52901; 22 Bn. Schoolteacher; of Fish Creek, Vic; b. Northcote, Vic, 6 Aug 1912. Killed in action 12 Dec 1943.

The 4th Brigade was fighting with a determination which evoked the admiration of the combat teams from the 9th Division with each battalion. Its performance gladdened the A.I.F. brigades and helped to dispel the impression that there was any real difference between the men of the A.I.F. and the "militia". At this stage the newcomers' attitude was one of keenness to "be in it"; the A.I.F.'s was expressed by the frequent question—how could the new battalions be expected to be good if they were not given a chance?

As there was now little fighting elsewhere powerful artillery support was available for the 4th Brigade. With the brigade moved Engineer Special Brigade amphibious scouts who rapidly reconnoitred captured beaches from the landward side and called up reconnaissance craft from the 532nd E.B.S.R. Thus in the Kiligia area, as in others later, a beach-head group, consisting of A.A.S.C., medical and E.S.B. detachments, was rapidly brought in by craft to set up a detailed issue depot. The engineers managed to keep the jeep track up with the leading infantry on the coast, but the troops moving on the high ground to the west were supplied by native carriers.

Soon after dawn on the 13th O'Connor sent his leading companies forward. There was little opposition on the right and the advance reached a fourth creek before meeting opposition, mainly from snipers. On the left, however, Captain Martin's company was fired on but immediately attacked and overran the enemy position killing eight. Private Brilliant,² leading one of the forward sections, was severely wounded but continued to lead his section into the assault until the second platoon came forward and mopped up. It was now 2.40 p.m. and the two leading companies on the right were approaching a fifth creek, where they soon disposed of an enemy post opposing the crossing. By the night of the 13th the battalion had made substantial progress against isolated rearguards, and dug in near the fifth creek.

Two companies of the 37th/52nd spent the day in a wide left-flank movement. The march up kunai-clad terraces was difficult and hot but no opposition was met until 6.15 p.m. when Captain Wicks³ company was fired on. It dug in but four hours later was attacked by an enemy force firing grenades, mortars, machine-guns and rifles. For four hours the attack continued fiercely. Private Cameron,⁴ manning a Bren gun in the forward section, was the sole survivor from his section, but continued to man the post alone throughout the night, thus helping to blunt and finally defeat the Japanese attack.⁵

² Cpl J. Brilliant, VX107913; 22 Bn. Farmer; of Melbourne; b. Mildura, Vic, 12 May 1923.

³ Major S. W. Wicks, VX108221; 37/52 Bn. Schoolteacher; of Melbourne; b. Fitzroy, Vic, 31 May 1909.

⁴ Pte G. R. A. Cameron, MM, VX75720; 37/52 Bn. Station hand; of Orford, Vic; b. Hawkesdale, Vic, 15 Apr 1912. Died of illness 11 Jan 1944.

⁵ At this time two changes were made among the supporting troops. "A" Squadron of the Tank Battalion began to relieve "C" Squadron. General Morshead had agreed with General Berryman's suggestion, and "C" Company of the Papuan Battalion which had been continuously in action for three months and often under artillery fire, was relieved by "A" Company from the Lae area, commanded by Lieutenant E. C. Vickery (of Goulburn, NSW).

The hotch-potch of Japanese units which had been contesting the 4th Brigade's advance now joined in Lakona units of the *80th Regiment*, particularly the *1/80th Battalion*. The *11/79th Battalion* had been in the area between Lakona and Hubika earlier but it now probably joined the rest of the *79th Regiment* making for Kalasa.

Late on the 13th Edgar ordered O'Connor to secure a bridgehead over the Sanga River next day. After overcoming some resistance, the 22nd Battalion forced the Japanese back from the river, and at dusk the leading company was overlooking Lakona and dug in on the southern fringe of a coconut plantation south of the village.

Out on the left flank the 37th/52nd met stiff resistance on the 14th from Japanese dug in 40 yards ahead. It was impossible to circle round in the precipitous country on the left flank but patrols were moving round the right and the battalion's mortar platoon came forward to bombard the enemy. With support from artillery, mortars and machine-guns the leading company drove out the battered enemy rearguard in the early afternoon.

The 15th looked like being a decisive day. At 8 a.m. two companies of the 22nd began to move through the coconuts and one company down the creek towards Lakona. This was the acid test for the Japanese; Lakona must be held a little longer as it was the key point along the route of the *20th Division's* retreat. Captain McFadden's company on the right met the first opposition. About 8.45 a.m. it was pinned down by machine-gun fire. McFadden estimated that between 60 and 70 Japanese were holding up his advance. A platoon of the left company (Captain Baldwin⁶) advanced about 150 yards north along the west edge of the plantation, but by 9.18 a.m. it too was held up after beginning to move east across the plantation. Another platoon then bypassed the plantation by going farther to the west and reached the western edge of the village of Lakona at 11 a.m. The third company (Major Howieson's⁷), moving north along both sides of the creek towards Lakona, linked with Baldwin's at 1.30 p.m., and then advanced to the mouth of the creek to block the enemy's escape. There was thus a ring of companies around Lakona and indeed inside Lakona, and the supporting arms—artillery, mortars, and machine-guns—combined to keep down Japanese heads.

Howieson's company reached the mouth of the creek at 3.45 p.m. Some Japanese attempting to withdraw along the base of the cliffs were grenaded by this company. Towards dusk McFadden's company reached the cliff edge. The descent from the cliff was steep and as it would have been foolhardy to go down in darkness the company dug in 50 yards from the edge.

The engineers tried all day to fix a tank crossing but by last light it was still not ready. A torrential downpour scoured the roads, flooded the rivers, washed away some of the sappers' bridges, and made a quag-

⁶ Lt-Col A. O. Baldwin, MC, DX850; 22 Bn. Regular soldier; of Petrie, Qld; b. Petrie, 14 Feb 1914.

⁷ Maj T. F. Howieson, ED, NX71021. II Corps, I Corps and NGF, 22 Bn. Accountant; of Northbridge, NSW; b. Stanmore, NSW, 19 Dec 1909.

mire of the ravine. The leading tank bogged near the creek and, as it could not be extricated by the combined efforts of three others and the bulldozer, it was locked and guarded by the infantry for the night. Captain Watson,⁸ now in command of the tanks, called back the other tanks into harbours guarded by the infantry. In preparing the crossing the sappers of the 2/7th Field Company were confronted on the far side by a hard coral bank which did not yield to pick and shovel work. They tried to get a compressor forward but it was marooned by the flood. Lieutenant Wyche⁹ then decided to blast the far bank in a novel way. He asked the tanks to fire solid shot into the coral bank and then used blast bombs in the holes made by the shot.

For the 37th/52nd the 15th was a day of more substantial progress. Against some sporadic rearguard opposition it advanced to the top of the 500 Feature, and patrolled along the Lakona Track without opposition. The rain was welcomed by this battalion as there was no water on the features which it was tactically necessary for them to capture. Just as an exhausted water party returned from the Sowi the rain came. Gas capes, groundsheets and steel helmets were immediately laid out to catch the rain, and it was suggested to the water party by their comrades that they should return to the Sowi and tip the water back as the battalion now had enough.

The enemy was still clinging to the fringe of Cape Sibida at last light. They were surrounded and doomed when the 16th dawned, but intended to fight to the last man. From early in the morning the 22nd Battalion began steadily to exert pressure. Baldwin sent Sergeant-Major Ryan's¹ platoon forward at 9 a.m. to attack from the north end of the plantation. The platoon moved from the plantation in extended line towards the Japanese clinging precariously to the cliff edge. Under heavy fire from about 50 Japanese on his left Ryan was eventually forced to withdraw about midday. So close were the advancing Australians to the Japanese that two men on the left were wounded by Japanese grenades. The compressor so urgently needed by the sappers arrived early on the 16th. By 5.15 p.m. the crossing could be tried. The bulldozer pushed a tank across the ravine and four others were pulled across. At 5.30 p.m. the five tanks lined up ahead of Baldwin's company with their guns pointing at the doomed Japanese whose backs were now so literally to the sea. From 150 yards the deadly fire crashed into the Japanese positions. Eight minutes after the start the tanks reached the cliff and the infantry mopped up a Japanese pocket near the creek. Many Japanese were killed and others were thought to have leapt from the cliffs of Cape Sibida to the rocks below.

Next day several stragglers were shot, including some trying to swim the Sanga. Forty-seven dead Japanese were counted by the end of the

⁸ Capt R. B. Watson, NX34919. 7 Div Cav Regt, 1 Tk Bn, 1 Armd Regt. Master process engraver; of Sydney; b. Sydney, 20 Dec 1912.

⁹ Capt P. Wyche, QX21401. 9 Div Engrs, 2/7 and 2/3 Fd Coys. Civil engineer; of Brisbane; b. Malanda, Qld, 22 Mar 1919.

¹ WO2 V. J. Ryan, MM, VX144096; 22 Bn. Road contractor and bridge builder; of Fish Creek, Vic; b. Wonthaggi, Vic, 1 Jan 1911.

17th. There had probably been about 70 in the pocket. Among the captured equipment were one heavy machine-gun, 12 L.M.G's, one 81-mm mortar, six light mortars and 40 rifles. Fourteen more Japanese were killed on the 17th by men of the 2/2nd Machine Gun Battalion who found these miserable men sheltering in caves below Cape Sibida. They may have been the ones thought to have flung themselves over the cliff. The 16th was thus a decisive day. The Japanese, despite a fanatical fight, had lost Lakona, the pivot of their escape route, but they had probably held it long enough to give the 80th and 79th Regiments a useful start.

Late on the 16th Edgar issued his orders for the next day. The 29th/46th would again take over the advance on the coast; with tanks and machine-gunners it would pass through the 22nd Battalion and seize a bridgehead across the Masaweng River. The 37th/52nd would hold the high ground on both sides of the Sanga and exploit north-west to the huts on the south bank of the Masaweng.

From 8 a.m. on the 17th the artillery fired 2,000 shells into the area through which the 29th/46th would advance. At 9 a.m. "A" Company, since Petersen's death commanded by Lieutenant Purbrick,² crossed the shallow lime-clouded channel of the Sanga near its mouth, and then Eames' company crossed 300 yards up the river and advanced on a parallel line. On the right deserted positions and equipment were found and there was only half-hearted resistance during the morning. The battalion's historian described it thus:

The general attitude and lack of initiative by the few enemy so far met with in the advance suggested that the terrific pounding had left them dazed and "bomb happy". The punishment imposed by the supporting arms seemed to have caused general demoralisation of the harassed rearguard.³

Both leading companies, with the tanks following, were near the creek about half way between the Sanga and the Masaweng soon after midday and saw Japanese ahead. After a bombardment the companies attacked. Purbrick's leading platoon was stopped in front of a 30-foot drop. A Japanese counter-attack developing from the left was broken up, but the company lost 3 killed and 3 wounded before pulling back and digging in 300 yards south of the creek. Eames, a quarter of a mile up the creek, made no better progress and he withdrew slightly to dig in. The stand by the Japanese at the creek was their last serious opposition to the advance of the 4th Brigade. In the afternoon of the 18th the 29th/46th reached the Masaweng and found two abandoned flame-throwers, three 75-mm guns, one 37-mm gun, one 4-inch mortar, one Woodpecker and many boxes of ammunition and detonators. The leading company crossed the river, which was about thigh-deep and 50 yards wide, and dug in along the strip of low jungle fringing the narrow beach.

To the west the leading companies of the 37th/52nd Battalion by last light on the 18th were just short of the Masaweng. This day General

² Lt W. I. Purbrick, VX51284; 29/46 Bn. Storeman and buyer; of Toorak, Vic; b. Camperdown, Vic, 6 Apr 1911.

³ R. Charlott (editor), *The Unofficial History of the 29/46th Australian Infantry Battalion (A.I.F.)* (1952), p. 72.

Wootten moved his headquarters to Kiligia. The 4th Brigade's next objective was Fortification Point, an imposing landmark. All that could be seen of it at this stage was a cliff running out of sight to the north. It was heavily skirted with dense timber up to about 300 feet where rocky grasslands stretched westwards and ended in a partly timbered peak. Edgar gave the 29th/46th Battalion the task of securing Fortification Point while the 37th/52nd Battalion cleared the left flank.

The leading companies of the 29th/46th set out at 8 a.m. on the 19th expecting opposition in the jungle, particularly as the high rocky ground dominated the only possible line of advance along the track, but only a few mortar bombs disturbed the advance during the morning. At 1.20 p.m. the first opposition was encountered. In accordance with instructions both companies withdrew slightly while the supporting arms prepared to "soften" the enemy position. In half an hour the 25-pounders fired 750 rounds; then Tilley's company advanced, with four tanks. By 3.30 p.m. the company was in ground which strongly favoured the enemy; to the left was a steep slope of coral terraces mostly covered with jungle, and to the right was a cliff dropping sheer to the sea. Here the company again came under fire but the tanks crawled forward and, in line ahead on a narrowing track, their Besas and howitzers blasted the enemy positions. At 5.25 the leading tank was fired on by a 37-mm gun from close range. Walking beside the tank were Captain Watson and his reconnaissance officer, Lieutenant Hall;⁴ both were among the wounded. Four direct hits were made on the forward tank but failed to damage it. While Sergeant Pile⁵ rescued Hall, whose ankle was shattered, the tank destroyed the Japanese gunners with fire from its howitzer. Eighteen Japanese were killed in this area, but little further progress could be made before the tanks were held up by a steep ravine, and the company dug in.

Farther to the left most of the 37th/52nd crossed the Masaweng during the day and were on the southern slopes of Fortification Hill by nightfall. The Japanese resistance was now finally broken and they were nowhere to be found on the 20th. Triumphant, the 29th/46th and 37th/52nd Battalions occupied Fortification Hill, and gazed beyond to where the coral terraces stood out in bare kunai and the space between the track and the sea widened out into flat, heavily-grassed and sometimes swampy land.⁶ To the north heavily-laden Japanese were hurrying, some carrying stretchers. These were speeded on their way by shell, mortar and machine-gun fire.

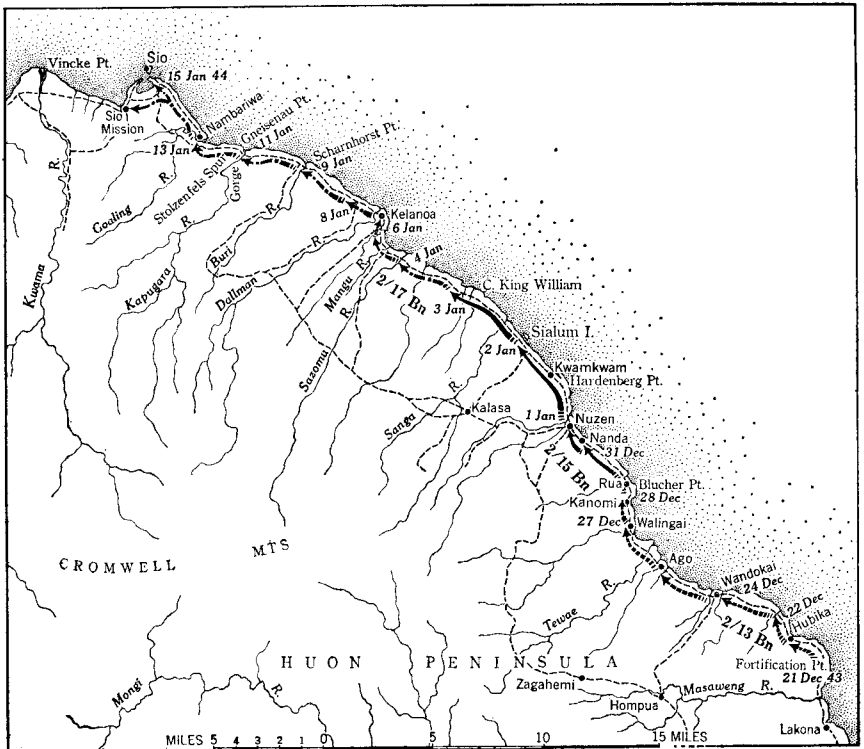
The 20th Brigade prepared to move through and take up what must now become a rapid pursuit. Supplies carried by the 532nd E.B.S.R. began to pour in to Masaweng—the fourth beach-head used in the 4th Brigade's

⁴ Lt H. P. Hall, NX131844. 1 Tk Bn, 1 Armd Regt. Bank officer; of Beecroft, NSW; b. Parramatta, NSW, 13 Jul 1920.

⁵ Sgt R. A. Pile, NX114545. 1 Tk Bn, 1 Armd Regt. Farmer; of The Entrance, NSW; b. Arncliffe, NSW, 6 Oct 1919.

⁶ The casualties suffered by the 4th Brigade during the period 5th-20th December were 65 killed and 136 wounded.

advance.⁷ On the 20th Wootten issued his orders to the 20th Brigade to advance on the 21st towards a line from the coast near Wandokai to the 1,000-foot feature dominating the coast there. In the next few days further reorganisation took place to allow this coastal advance to continue with two brigades (20th and 26th). The 24th Brigade took over the Gusika-Wareo-Sattelberg area with responsibility for the area south to Langemak Bay, and the 4th held the Fortification Point-Masaweng



The 20th Brigade pursuit to Sio, 21st December 1943 to 15th January 1944

River area. The 26th moved down to the coast and was gradually ferried to the Masaweng's mouth in the faithful American craft.

From Fortification Point to Kapugara Gorge the coastal track ran along a flat kunai ledge, some hundreds of yards wide, between the sea on one side and sharply rising coral terraces on the other. There was very little cover along the line of the advance, the scanty timber occurring mainly along the line of the numerous rivers and creeks. Few natives inhabited the area, and these in a few villages marked by the inevitable

⁷ Beaches used by the 4th Brigade were successively Coconut, Kiligia, Lakona, Masaweng.

coconut trees. This terrain offered more opportunity than previously for rapid and sustained movement, although the high ground to the left could be defended by a stubborn enemy.

Behind the 20th Brigade the 26th Brigade would follow closely to watch the leading brigade's rear, including the beach-heads, and protect its left flank by patrols to the main inland track from Zegahemi to Kalasa. The Papuans would patrol deep to the west; the 4th Brigade would cover the left rear of the advance by patrolling the inland area north of the Masaweng and linking at Hompua with patrols from Wareo, where the 2/4th Commando Squadron was now under command of the 24th Brigade which was responsible for patrolling south of the Masaweng.

The men of the 20th Brigade were not in the best physical condition when they began the pursuit. The brigade was weary, and hard hit by malaria. Colonel Simpson anticipated that, even if the enemy was reluctant to defend the heights, he would need to ensure the safety of his left flank by having one or two companies travelling parallel with the main coastal advance. This flank going would be difficult and Simpson prepared for fairly quick reliefs. It was rightly thought that there would be little water along the coast and that the heat in the long kunai would prove very trying. Bounds were therefore planned so that, as far as possible, the troops would reach flowing water each day.

For Wootten the rate of advance would be regulated by two main factors. The first was maintenance of the force and Wootten required that at least seven days' supplies should be within reach of the forward troops who might sometimes be isolated from the rear beach-heads by rough weather. The second factor was the necessity for providing continuous artillery support. Blamey, Berryman and Wootten visited Simpson's headquarters on 21st December and directed that the brigade should avoid unnecessary casualties by using artillery and tanks.

In addition, the 20th Brigade would continue to have air and P.T. boat support. Bostons, Mitchells, Marauders, Airacobras or Thunderbolts helped to cause material damage and moral confusion among the enemy by bombing and strafing supply and retreat trails and barge hideouts. No less disastrous for the enemy were the raids of the intrepid P.T. boats. For instance, from the 9th to the 13th the boats sank 23 barges along the coast, mostly south from Sio, and damaged many more.

Simpson's advance began at 8 a.m. on 21st December when the 2/13th Battalion followed by the 2/15th crossed the Masaweng. For the first time in the battalion's experience in New Guinea the walkie-talkies worked satisfactorily, probably because of the more open country. The troops advanced fast despite the heat of the kunai plain and the rugged going in the coral terraces. By 4 p.m. the leading company of the 2/13th entered Hubika. There was no opposition except when men advancing to the creek beyond Hubika were fired on by a rifle. Clearly visible on the terraces to the left were the other two companies. The battalion diarist wrote thus of the gravity of the Japanese plight:

Hubika Creek was an indescribable scene. Naked enemy dead everywhere. Evidently used as a dressing station. 40 dead in one small cave. None had been buried. The area was foul and nauseating.

"Japan soldier he go Wandokai," said a wounded Japanese captured in the kunai near Hubika. During the morning Wandokai, Walingai and Ago were bombed and strafed by eleven Bostons. On the 21st the jeep road reached Hubika. The engineers found that a gorge just beyond Hubika would prevent any progress by the tanks, now commanded by Captain Hardcastle.⁸ There was no alternative route so the sappers set to work to cut and fill in the gorge. The outlook was not hopeful for tank support as the sappers estimated that this work would take several days. Without the tanks but preceded by a strike of 12 Bostons and 8 Marauders on targets between Hubika and Wandokai, the 2/13th Battalion advanced about 3,000 yards without opposition on 22nd December. The infantry were now beyond the range of effective artillery support. Groups of Japanese could be seen ahead.

The enemy had intended to defend the Wandokai area particularly as defences had been built in the area for some time by Colonel Michitoshi Iba, the commander of the 20th Transport Regiment who was responsible for beach defence from Kanomi to Wandokai. The enemy had a long-standing fear of the Australians landing between the Song and Sio, however, and as the retreat was orderly the Japanese commander decided not to fight for Wandokai but to continue with his task of reaching Sio by 7th January. Thus Captain Yoshikawa, commanding the rearguard, issued orders to withdraw from Wandokai on the night 23rd-24th December: "Prepare to move towards Ago vicinity on the coast road." This was actually the fourth echelon in the coastal withdrawal. Ahead was the third—Lieut-Colonel Shobu's *II/80th Battalion*. The second comprised regimental headquarters and the *III/80th Battalion*. The leading echelon of the withdrawal was Colonel Jushiro Saeki's *26th Field Artillery Regiment*. Major Tashiro's mixed force was apparently ahead of this.

By nightfall the leading company of the 2/13th was 1,500 yards beyond Wandokai. At 6 p.m. Captain Yoshikawa from Ago mortared the leading company and about two hours later two 75-mm guns from the Walingai area opened up and fired 83 shells causing four casualties. Simpson was not surprised when Colonel Barham rang at 10 p.m. to say that there would be no forward movement on the 25th, and none on the 26th unless artillery and tank support were available. Another reason for a pause was that, as on Shaggy Ridge, all commanders wished Christmas Day to be treated as a rest day if possible. In any event the advance could not be resumed until stores caught up. Strenuous efforts were made by all headquarters on Christmas Day to see that the men enjoyed as happy a Christmas as possible. For the 26th, 24th and 4th Brigades this task was not difficult, and in most units ham, turkey, roast potatoes and Christmas puddings replaced the usual fare. Parcels from the Comforts Fund also arrived in time and supplemented free issues of canteen goods.

⁸ Lt-Col G. H. Hardcastle, VX101918. 1 Tk Bn, 1 Armd Regt; ALO 10 Fleet Air Wing USN Philippines 1945. Regular soldier; of Sydney; b. Buenos Aires, Argentina, 9 Oct 1921.

Some unit diarists commented unhappily, "No beer", and the fine Christmas dinner was washed down with fruit drinks. A Piper Cub from No. 4 Squadron dropped Christmas fare to Captain Gore's Papuan company far to the west at Kulungtufu. In most units Christmas services were held. Late in the afternoon the 9th Division saw a thrilling sight, a huge convoy of landing craft and warships sailing steadily north. This was the American invasion force for Cape Gloucester. It was not so long ago that the 9th Division itself had presented to the watchers in the hills round Salamaua a similar display of might as it sailed to the hostile shore near Lae.

On Christmas afternoon the 28th was tentatively agreed upon as the date for resuming the advance. Simpson told division he had insufficient artillery, and on Boxing Day the 62nd Battery arrived in Wandokai and the 2/12th Field Regiment began to relieve the 2/6th which had earned a rest after the rigours of the Salamaua and Huon Peninsula campaign. The 26th was a day of achievement for the 2/3rd Field Company which finished crossings over the four obstacles which had held them up beyond Hubika.

The Americans landed at Cape Gloucester on 26th December and were undoubtedly profiting from the Australians' victory on the Huon Peninsula and from the consequent inability of the Japanese to help New Britain from New Guinea. As intended in the original planning Vitiav Strait was now dominated by the Allies. The role of II Australian Corps would be "active patrolling and vigorous infiltration" in defence of the Corps area. The exploitation along the coast would continue but major forces would not be committed. With the American right hook now at length following the Australian straight left, the planners could look ahead. Berryman was warned that, depending on the speed and success of the Cape Gloucester operation, a detachment from Alamo Force might be able to hop across soon to Saidor. Such an operation could render hopeless the situation of the Japanese *20th* and *51st Divisions*. On the 27th divisional headquarters moved to Wandokai and next day corps headquarters moved to Heldsbach.

At 9 a.m. on the 27th, 18 Mitchells and 12 Bostons bombed and strafed the Walingai and Kanomi areas, and the 2/13th, which Simpson had decided to send ahead a day earlier than planned, advanced unopposed; first Ago and then Walingai were occupied. By last light the battalion was holding from Walingai forward to the Tewae River. The speed of the Australian advance was now beginning to tell. The enemy was finding it increasingly difficult to extricate himself, and his four echelons retreating along the coast began to get mixed up with one another.

At 11.15 a.m. on the 28th the forward patrol of the 2/13th was fired on from the last creek before Kanomi, and 14 Japanese were seen retreating north round Blucher Point. Half an hour later the two leading companies opened up with their Vickers and mortars on more Japanese moving round the point. By 6 p.m. the enemy was in full retreat and

70 were seen moving down the spur on the left towards Rua. As ready re-supply for the forward troops could not be guaranteed, Wootten halted the advance for two days.

Early on the 31st the 2/15th, accompanied by the tanks, moved through the 2/13th at Kanomi and resumed the advance with one company forward along the coastal track and another attempting to keep pace through the difficult country on the left. A few bands of Japanese hurrying north were seen during the day and were chased by artillery fire. At 5.30 p.m. the leading troops were fired on by about 40 Japanese in Nanda. Colonel Grace decided to avoid unnecessary casualties and halted at the last creek before Nanda. Grace and Major Thwaites, who was controlling the guns supporting the advance, suspected that there was a Japanese headquarters in Nanda and that harassing fire from artillery and mortars might ensure the flight of the Japanese before morning.

On 1st January 1944 Brigadier Windeyer returned to command 20th Brigade after a long period of hospital treatment and convalescence (Simpson resumed command of the 2/17th Battalion two days later). As expected there were no Japanese in Nanda and the advance continued throughout New Year's Day. The 2/15th Battalion dug in north of Nuzen and a patrol reached half way to Kwamkwam.

The two days' spell by the 20th Brigade had given the Japanese a chance to get ahead. "Division will advance (*sic*) to Sio," ordered the *80th Regiment* on 30th December. "For this purpose a portion will firmly occupy Scharnhorst and Kalasa vicinity." A handwritten copy of an operation order dated 29th December said that "Divisional main force has not arrived at Kalasa yet". This probably referred to the *79th Regiment (20th Division)*. By this time the remnants of the *238th Regiment (41st Division)*, which had contested the advance of the 4th Brigade, and the battered *102nd Regiment (51st Division)* were in the Sio-Nambariwa area and were probably responsible for its defence.

The 2/15th kept up the momentum on 2nd January: it passed Kwamkwam early in the afternoon and at 4 p.m. reached Sialum Island. The capture of Sialum, about half way between Fortification Point and Sio, was an important event. It had a sheltered beach and all-weather anchorage, and there a big supply dump could be built up. This was an auspicious start for the year. The Japanese were in flight round the coast of the Huon Peninsula. Relentlessly pursued by the 9th Division they were hammered almost nightly at sea by the P.T. boats and often were attacked during the day by American and Australian aircraft. The landing of the Americans across their escape route at Saidor on 2nd January created another hazard for them.

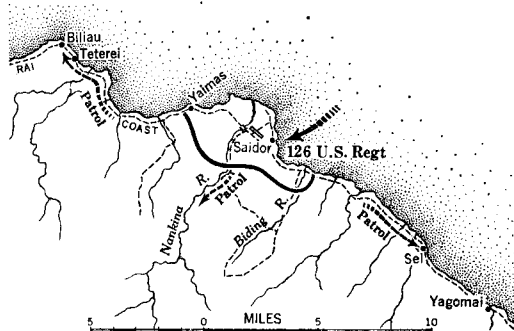
On 17th December General Krueger, the commander of the Sixth American Army, had been ordered by General MacArthur to seize the Saidor area on the Rai Coast of New Guinea on or before 2nd January 1944. This landing was planned as an exploitation, and was contingent

on quick success at Long Island,⁹ Arawe and particularly Cape Gloucester. On 22nd December Krueger established the Saidor Task Force consisting mainly of the 126th Regiment from the 32nd Division. Brigadier-General Clarence A. Martin was to command this force, whose job would be to capture the Saidor area, control such adjacent areas "as would be required to ensure uninterrupted operation of our air and light naval forces", and help to establish air and naval facilities. By the 28th Martin was informed that the Cape Gloucester operation was proceeding better than expected and the Saidor operation would probably proceed as planned.

The task force arrived off Saidor unmolested on the morning of the 2nd. Because of low-hanging clouds, drizzling rain and darkness of the wooded beaches H-hour was postponed 35 minutes to 7.25 a.m. A naval bombardment covered the landing which was unopposed. By the end of the day about 8,000 troops were ashore. Among the troops were an Australian officer, an Angau detachment and 11 native police boys. By 3rd January the I/126th Battalion was patrolling the tracks to the south, the II Battalion was dug in along the Biding River and the III Battalion was dug in on Yaimas Ridge.

There were several skirmishes with the Japanese in the next few days. A patrol from the II/126th Battalion reached Sel on the 5th and established an outpost there.

On the western flank a patrol from the III/126th skirmished with enemy parties at Teterei and Biliau. Patrols were also moving to the south but generally the Americans were content to remain in their areas. It was a pity that Brigadier-General Martin's orders did not provide for a vigorous



attempt to prevent the escape of the Japanese who were now beginning to hurry from Sio in the face of the steady Australian advance. It was

⁹ On the night of 26th December a company from the boat battalion of the 592nd EBSR with an Australian radar detachment landed on Long Island, 105 miles north of Finschhafen and at the head of Vitiaz Strait—an excellent place for a radar and lookout station. The group of about 200 officers and men under the command of Major Leonard Kaplan went to Long Island on PT boats, arriving there soon after midnight on the 26th-27th. The men went ashore in rubber boats.

Three days before Major Kaplan and two scouts had reconnoitred the island and found no trace of enemy occupation. Although the Japanese had never garrisoned Long Island it had been used as a staging point for Japanese barges from Rabaul to Wewak. Seizure of Long Island stopped this traffic.

Since the island was some distance from the mainland resupply was difficult. Several LCM convoys carrying rations and supplies came through rough seas to Long Island in the next few weeks and PT boats frequently left supplies, but mostly the detachment was left entirely alone. "The men did not mind this a bit, for although life was somewhat boring, the natives were friendly, the island with its twin mountain peaks and large volcanic lake was beautiful, fishing was good—and there were no Japs. The detachment remained on Long Island almost two months during which time they set up the radar station and constructed a cub airstrip."—*History of the Second Engineer Special Brigade*, p. 65.

not that the Americans did not have enough troops, for the 128th Regiment arrived at Saidor on 19th January to reinforce the 126th. Martin apparently realised what could be done for he wrote in his report:

It was apparent that an advance to the E and an attack on the enemy withdrawing westward towards Gali, coupled with a defense of the W, would, in addition to defending the Saidor area on the E flank, provide an opportunity to destroy the Japanese before they could reorganise for an attack on the Saidor position from the E. . . . On 21 Jan a letter from the Commanding General, Alamo Force, dated 18 Jan, was received. . . . It contained information relative to the possibility of attacks on both flanks and to the despatch of additional units to the Saidor area. This letter stated that the mission of the Task Force remained unchanged. The troops referred to in this letter had already reached the area when the letter was received.

Krueger put it this way in his report:

The threat of enemy counter-attacks which had been further magnified by native reports, had already delayed the transition from the defensive to the offensive and the incessant torrential rains, which rendered all tracks and rivers impassable, caused great difficulty in the movement of troops and supplies to outlying sectors. Japanese units, brought from Madang, blocked access to the main escape routes, and although the task force pushed its attacks and patrolled vigorously, efforts to prevent the escape of the Japs retiring before the Australians were not completely successful.

The Australians were delighted with the Saidor landing and expected that their task would be made much easier. By midday on 3rd January the 2/15th Battalion was crossing the Sanga River which proved to be a tank obstacle. The battalion was now hot on the trail. Parties of Japanese were moving across the terraces and presented good targets.

On 4th January General Adachi decided to give up the struggle and ordered his *20th* and *51st Divisions* to withdraw to Madang under command of General Nakano of the *51st*. Two days later the advanced units of both divisions left Sio and Kiari respectively; the two headquarters left on the 8th (*20th Division*) and the 11th (*51st Division*). The main force of the divisions followed, barges carrying the sick to Gali on the nights of the 8th and the 10th. By the 12th all except the stragglers were on their way west from Sio.

The 2/17th now took over the advance from the 2/15th, the 26th Brigade began to close up to the Sanga, and to the south other changes affecting the future of the 9th Division were ordered. For instance, the 24th Brigade was ordered to concentrate in the Scarlet Beach-North Hill area and prepare for embarkation to Australia. The 8th Brigade was moving to Finschhafen from Australia in ships which would backload the 24th Brigade.

The 2/17th Battalion reached its objective—the Sazomu River—without opposition on the morning of the 4th. A patrol then went forward to the Mangu River where there was some sporadic opposition. Eight Japanese were killed during the day, four dead were counted and three sick prisoners were taken. There was no opposition again on the 6th during the 2/17th's advance to the Dallman River.

The Japanese were now being shot at from all quarters. For the past three days Mitchells, Marauders, Kittyhawks and Thunderbolts had been attacking the enemy's hideouts and supply routes along the coast, Nambariwa being the main target. The Japanese commanders knew that their line of retreat had been effectively cut at Saidor. The plight of the numerous bands of enemy encountered inland by the Papuan and Australian patrols was pitiable; sick, hungry and often without weapons, they had no chance.¹

The coastal belt west of the Dallman mouth, although not heavily timbered, offered more cover to the enemy than previously. No doubt realising that few opportunities remained to offer effective resistance, the Japanese now made their most determined stand since the 20th Brigade began its advance. Before pushing on again Windeyer decided to reconnoitre the area ahead carefully in order to avoid unnecessary casualties. At 8 a.m. on the 8th the 2/17th advanced; half an hour later the leading company was held up by fire from a track junction. There seemed to be about 40 determined Japanese with four machine-guns holding the area. Eight of them were killed and the Australians had one killed and two wounded. As the company could make no headway without further casualties Simpson withdrew it to a kunai patch south-east of the track junction so that artillery mortars and machine-guns could hit the Japanese.

By 9.30 a.m. next day the battalion passed through the position which had held them up the day before; it consisted of two pill-boxes and 12 foxholes, and several dead were lying around. Later in the morning a band of about 30 heavily armed and determined Japanese again held up the advance about 1,500 yards from the Buri River. Artillery, mortars and machine-guns bombarded the Japanese position and at 4 p.m. when the tanks arrived the enemy fled. The battalion reached the Buri River by nightfall.

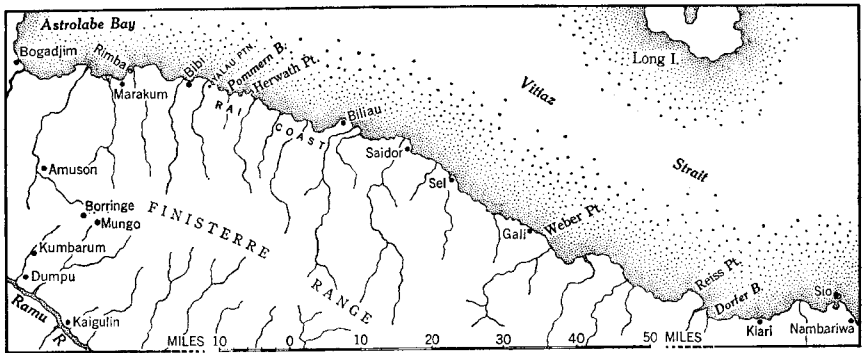
Windeyer believed that the Japanese, with the difficult Stolzenfels Spur to cross, would not linger east of the Kapugara Gorge for fear of being cut off. This proved correct and the 2/17th Battalion reached the Kapugara River without opposition at 2.40 p.m. on the 11th. On the way the leading tank ran over a cluster of mines and had a track blown off; it was fixed in three hours, but the nature of the country ahead prevented further use of the tanks which returned and leaguered on the south side of the Buri. Fourteen dead Japanese were counted along the way and two prisoners were taken near the gorge. A patrol crossed the Kapugara on the sandbar at its mouth at 4 p.m. to investigate a track leading along the cliff face. Further progress round Gneisenau Point was barred when the patrol came to a sheer cliff face 20 feet high. The remains of rope and wooden ladders showed how the Japanese had negotiated this very difficult track.

It was obvious from the landward and seaward defences and the equipment lying around that the Japanese had attached great importance to this area. Round the river mouth had been a staging camp and the whole

¹ On 7th January Berryman instructed that, to save fatigue, deep inland patrolling would cease.

place was disgustingly filthy. The Australians were now becoming used to the sight of unburied dead lining the track. At the mouth of the Kapugara there was evidence of the destruction caused by the P.T. boats when two wrecked barges, an armed patrol boat and a submersible barge were found.

During the past few nights the P.T. boats had been particularly aggressive. On the 7th-8th five 70-foot barges were attacked a few miles north of Pommern Bay on a south-east course, two food rafts were sunk off Nambariwa and a submarine was attacked a few miles from there. In this submarine was General Adachi who had been trying for some days



Sio to Bogadjim

to reach Sio from Madang in order to superintend the retreat. The submarine survived and entered Sio on the 8th. Next night the P.T. boats destroyed an enemy barge and engaged enemy troops on the Nambariwa beach, sank three barges—one loaded with about 100 troops—near Herwath Point, sank three loaded barges off Rimba, and destroyed three barges on the beach at Marakum. This was excellent hunting, but it was better still on the night 9th-10th January when the P.T. boats attacked six barges laden with troops off Dorfer Bay. The Japanese barges were armed with 13-mm guns and put up a stiff fight, but one was sunk and the others damaged. That night two out of 8 barges laden with troops going north-west were sunk off Weber Point and the remaining six damaged. Six more barges were destroyed on the beach at Bibi. On the 10th-11th three P.T. boats prowling north of Reiss Point sank three enemy barges each containing about 30 troops and took one prisoner. North of Sio two barges and a large lifeboat were destroyed.

The health of the 9th Division was steadily deteriorating. In the coastal area dengue was now causing heavy evacuations.² Of the 2/17th Bat-

² Writing to General Blamey early in the New Year Berryman said: "Our battle casualties have been kept very low. . . . Unfortunately a wave of dengue has swept through us. . . . All units not moving are holding the majority of their cases but the 26th Aust Inf Bde being on the move found it necessary to evacuate several hundred. Coming from the hills down to the coast the dengue hit them more severely than other units. Fortunately we have had two cool nights with a strong sea breeze and there has been a marked drop in the number of new cases. I am hoping that we have passed the peak."

talion's total casualties of 298 in December, 291 were evacuated sick. Of the 2/23rd Battalion's total casualties of 199 in December, 109 were sick; this battalion had been on comparatively high ground throughout the month and had therefore not suffered so much from newly-caught fevers. In the three months from its arrival at Scarlet Beach at the end of September the 2/43rd Battalion had a complete changeover in strength; 706 men landed and 130 were received as reinforcements; 742 casualties were suffered, including 600 evacuated sick, of whom 396 returned.

On the surface it seemed that the 9th Division's anti-mosquito discipline might not be strict enough, even though operational conditions had been difficult and many of those evacuated were recurrent cases. The diarist of one experienced unit thought that his unit was not "repellent conscious" and wrote that men were being returned from hospital without the mosquito nets which they took there. Those in authority were finding that it was not sufficient to instruct men to take atabrin, apply anti-mosquito repellent, roll down sleeves and trousers, wear gaiters and sleep under nets; such instructions must be enforced in the same way in which a child is made to take medicine. A sidelight on this anti-mosquito discipline was that the men had a horror of scrub typhus and never needed supervision when applying repellent in an area containing ticks.

The problem of getting the 2/17th Battalion over the Stolzenfels Spur was a very difficult one and for a while Windeyer thought of landing by sea at Nambariwa but shortage of craft ruled out this proposition. During the morning of 12th January a platoon succeeded in replacing a rope ladder, and after climbing two wooden ladders the men pushed along a well-worn track to an area which was very recently a Japanese headquarters. The platoon then returned and climbed the 550-foot feature at the tip of the Stolzenfels Spur and established a standing patrol which could see Sio and Nambariwa.

At 8 a.m. on the 13th, a company of the 2/17th crossed the Kapugara River and, accompanied by the Papuans, began the hazardous climb. Three hours later the men were moving forward along the coastal track, having successfully climbed the cliff face with rope ladders. Meanwhile, the sappers of the 2/13th Field Company improved the rope ladders for the infantry, who climbed up hand over hand, and rigged ropes for raising the infantry's packs and equipment. Lieutenant Spry found another route which was rapidly put into use with ladders so that both approaches could be used. The battalion crossed the Goaling River using small boats left behind by the Japanese and then entered the deserted shambles of Nambariwa. One prisoner was taken, six Japanese were shot, and nine more were found dead. On the 15th the 2/17th Battalion occupied Sio.

The Sio-Nambariwa area contained large dumps of all kinds which the enemy had made no systematic attempt to destroy. It was found that Nambariwa was the principal enemy supply base for the Finschhafen area. Both banks of the river had been used to provide barge off-loading points, barge hideouts, or dump areas. A huge fuel dump, a barge workshop, and an engineer stores dump were found. In the Goaling's upper reaches there

were large bivouac and hospital areas. The various arms of the river had been used for hiding and off-loading barges and there were large dumps of various kinds. All principal dumps had suffered from aerial bombardment and six sunken barges were visible in one deep river.

The 9th Division had now completed its task. On 13th January Berryman ordered the commander of the 5th Division to take over the forward area as soon as Brigadier Cameron's³ 8th Brigade could relieve the 20th. Cameron arrived in Nambariwa on 15th January.

Mopping up continued for the next six days. Patrols from Sio Mission killed 8 Japanese and counted 16 bodies on the 16th. Nine Japanese were killed on the 17th and a sergeant-major was taken prisoner. Patrols up the Goaling found further huge dumps of equipment and weapons. In the afternoon Captain Pursehouse, the devoted Angau officer whose local knowledge had been most valuable, was killed by a lone sniper south of Sio lagoon after interrogating about 350 natives collected by the 2/17th Battalion.

On the 21st the 4th Battalion, 8th Brigade and 5th Division took over the area from the 2/17th Battalion, 20th Brigade and 9th Division respectively.⁴

During the advance from Fortification Point to the Sio-Nambariwa area the 20th Brigade covered more than 50 miles in 24 days of which 16 were marching days. Up to the time of its relief by the 8th Brigade, 303 enemy had been killed or found dead and 22 prisoners had been taken. The 20th Brigade's casualties for the same period were 16 including three killed, but the evacuations for sickness numbered 31 officers and 927 men!

Besides a great quantity of equipment and stores of all kinds the 20th Brigade captured or destroyed six 75-mm guns, three 37-mm guns, three 20-mm guns, one heavy and six light machine-guns, three 81-mm mortars, five 90-mm mortars, four light mortars, four flame-throwers, one anti-aircraft gun, one 50-mm grenade discharger and 500 new rifles.

In the four months' campaign from 22nd September 1943 until 21st January 1944 the 9th Division had severely defeated the Japanese *20th Division*. At one stage 12,600 Japanese were forward of Sio. Out of this total 3,099 were counted dead, 38 were captured and the estimate for wounded at the rate of three wounded to two killed was 4,644; making a casualty total of 7,781.⁵ This estimate by the 9th Division's Intelligence staff was substantiated by captured documents and prisoners. From prisoners and captured unit strength states it seemed that about 4,300 survived to withdraw from Sio towards Saidor. A large proportion

³ Brig C. E. Cameron, MC, ED, NX110380. (1st AIF: Lt 20 Bn.) Comd 8 Bde 1940-44, 2 Bde 1944. Accountant; of Turramurra, NSW; b. Balmain, NSW, 13 Sep 1894.

⁴ The 24th Brigade was first to return to Australia; the 2/28th Battalion embarked on 19th January, the 2/43rd on 23rd January, the 2/32nd on 31st January. The 26th Brigade was second to go; the 2/48th Battalion embarked on 7th February, the 2/23rd on 10th February and the 2/24th on 25th February. The 20th Brigade was last to go; the 2/13th Battalion embarked on 28th February and the 2/15th and 2/17th on 2nd March.

⁵ When asked after the war about casualties for this campaign General Adachi said that they numbered about 7,000, but that he was then unable to give accurate casualty figures of the various phases.

of this miserable remnant was ineffective because of wounds, sickness or exhaustion. Between Sio and Saidor the 8th Brigade later counted about 1,200 dead. In gaining this victory the 9th Division had suffered 1,028 casualties during the period 2nd October 1943 to 15th January 1944; 283 of these, including 16 officers, were killed, 744 including 50 officers were wounded and one man was missing. By its devotion and fighting ability the 9th had turned aside the last Japanese attempts to regain the initiative in this part of New Guinea, and had thereafter remorselessly attacked, pursued and destroyed the enemy.

While they were doing this the Americans had been building up a big base in the southern part of the area which the 9th Division had seized. As the 2/13th Battalion was on its way to embark for home in a transport that was lying in Langemak Bay

everyone was amazed at the development that had taken place since its capture some five months previously. Where there had been foot-tracks, or at the best jeep tracks, there were now wide coral roads, Langemak Bay had been bridged, there were wharves and Liberty ships, an airstrip and seemingly endless dumps of all types of equipment. The base had been needed for future operations in the S.W.P.A. and the Yanks who moved in soon after its capture had developed it at a great rate.⁶

⁶ G. H. Fearnside (Editor), *Bayonets Abroad—A History of the 2/13th Battalion A.I.F. in the Second World War* (1953), pp. 354-5.